



PhD stipends: a thing of the past?

By Danielle Pullan

It is a privilege to pursue a doctoral degree, particularly inside a highly-regarded institution like the Max Planck Society. It is unlikely that many of us will ever again get the opportunity to spend three to five years focused on one core research project without many of the distractions that more senior academics have to manage. We learn so much about how things work inside academia, how to read and research more efficiently, and how to effectively communicate our scientific findings.

But despite all of these benefits and the personal satisfaction, we are researchers doing a full-time job. The Max Planck Society recognized this in 2015 when it converted all internally-financed stipends into proper employment contracts across the entire Society. Furthermore, the MPS recognized the value of doctoral researchers' (DRs) labor when they increased the base contract rate from 50% to 65% of TVöD level E-13 in late 2020. This change came about after years of advocacy work from our predecessors in Phdnet. We are grateful for their tireless efforts and for the work done by the MPS General Administration to make this change happen.

But are PhD stipends really a thing of the past?

It's complicated. While the MPS' policy requires DRs to be paid with contracts, some members of our community are externally funded: 5% of DRs report currently receiving a stipend instead of a contract in the 2020 Phdnet Survey. This number is higher among non-Europeans, women, and DRs in the Human Sciences section. Some stipend recipients are members of IMPRS programs; some of them are funded by foreign governments; some of them work on third-party funded projects; some of them receive prestigious fellowships from foundations. What they all unfortunately have in common is the stressful experience of "working" while not really being employed.

"While the MPS' policy requires DRs to be paid with contracts, some members of our community are externally funded: 5% of DRs report currently receiving a stipend instead of a contract in the 2020 Phdnet Survey."

In the spirit of full disclosure, I, the author, am paid a 50% stipend by my university. I applied to my IMPRS program, the job posting for which was on the MPI's website. All candidates for the IMPRS were held to the same academic standards and went through the same interview procedure. I only learned about the stipend/contract issue after I had already been offered a position in my program. To their credit, my IMPRS has taken steps since I joined to make this information more transparent: they now list on the application page that some members of the IMPRS will receive stipends while others receive contracts, and they provide a bit of information about what this tangibly means. I am not writing this piece to put my own institute or IMPRS under the microscope. But there are many of us with such stories hidden in plain sight across the Max Planck Society, all with stories that follow a similar pattern.

While the Max Planck Society has taken significant steps to improve the working conditions of doctoral researchers, they do not work alone, and they cannot control the way that other academic and funding institutions are managed. In my case, the issue is that our IMPRS is jointly funded from the budgets of the MPI and the university, and my funding comes from the university's account. Until universities and other funders of research across Germany start to adopt policies like the MPS', there will continue to be many DRs who are paid stipends instead of contracts.

What's the **big** deal?

The implications for doctoral researchers' total compensation, social security benefits, immigration status, and general sense of security in their life in Germany are manifold, and detailed in the table next page. To summarize, stipends offer lower payments in the first place, which are further reduced by the fact that stipend holders need to self-finance their health insurance and retirement savings, and they have no social safety net in case they are unemployed after finishing their PhD.

Over the course of a four year PhD,

a DR receiving a stipend may be

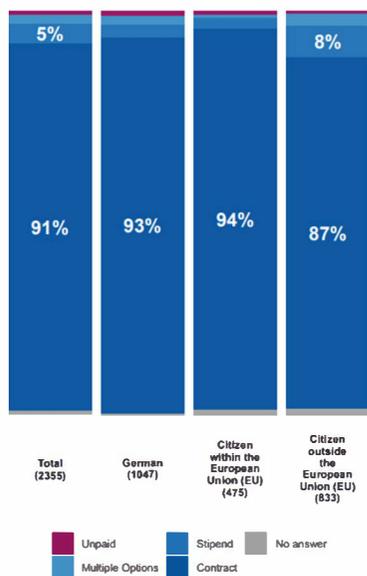
losing almost 30,000 €

compared to their colleagues with contracts. Moreover, the cost of purchasing health insurance, would add

another 10,000 €.

| CONTRACTS | | STIPENDS |
|--|--|--|
| This varies across the Bundesländer and depending on the individual's marital status and religious registration, but a 65% contract pays between 1900 - 2000 euros per month after taxes. | Amount of monthly cash compensation | Most stipends are supposedly equivalent to 50% of TVöD E-13 or less. Stipends paid by foreign governments are typically the lowest paid. Stipend recipients receive between 1300-1600 euros per month, which is not taxed. |
| Most MPG DR contracts are offered for an initial period of three years, with possible extension up to one year. | Duration | Varies depending upon the funder, but sometimes as short as only six months. University stipends usually last longer than foundation ones. |
| Christmas bonus is typically included, as well as cost of living increases each year. Over time, employees move up steps of compensation within the E-13 band. Government assistance during COVID and energy crises is another employee bonus. | Increases and bonuses | No Christmas bonus, and cost of living increases are not guaranteed or common. Years worked on a stipend do not count for moving up steps of the pay band, so postdoc salary is started at a disadvantage. Less or no government assistance during crises. |
| Employment contracts include health insurance, retirement insurance, and other types of social security contributions. After finishing a contract, they are eligible to collect unemployment benefits. | Social security | Stipend holders need to purchase their own health insurance and the employer does not contribute to retirement or other social security funds. They are not eligible for unemployment benefits after the stipend ends. Non-EU citizens often must purchase private health insurance, which is very expensive if you have preexisting conditions. |
| Residence permits are typically awarded for the entire duration of the contract period. | Immigration status during PhD (for non-EU citizens) | Residence permits are often not awarded for the entire planned PhD period, requiring multiple renewal processes that take time and can result in limitations on the DRs' ability to travel while awaiting renewal. |
| Regulated by §18 of the Residence Act, as employees. Time during PhD counts toward permanent residence and citizenship. | Residence in Germany after PhD (for non-EU citizens) | Regulated by §16 of the Residence Act, a special category for doctoral students. Time during PhD does not count toward permanent residence and citizenship. |

The worst effects of stipends are felt by non-EU citizens. Aside from the challenges that all international researchers face of living far away from home and needing to save up to travel to see family, non-EU stipend holders often pay higher health insurance costs, and spend more time repeatedly renewing their residence permits. They also have a harder time staying in Germany after their PhD, since time spent as a "student" is not counted towards permanent residence and citizenship applications down the road.



Strikingly, more non-European citizens (8%) are awarded stipends than Europeans (less than 3%) according to the 2020 PhDnet Survey. This is hugely problematic, as it suggests that the intellectual contributions of non-European researchers are less valuable than their European colleagues'. A structural explanation for this phenomenon is the use of stipends by foreign governments and German institutions that support foreign researchers. These institutions feel justified in this practice because stipends that are low by German standards may be high in their country of origin, but when DRs are working in Germany and producing value for German academic institutions, they need to be paid equally to their German and European colleagues. Truly solving this issue will probably require policy solutions bigger than the MPS. But as an institution that values the diversity of our research communities, we owe it to these colleagues to pay them equally, and pay them enough to live in Germany.

Figure B.10: Types of Contracts of DR by Citizenship (Total: 2356, German: 1048, Citizen within the European Union: 475, Citizen outside the European Union: 833; Responses given less than 3% are not labelled)

The financial and legal implications of stipends are the most dire problem that many recipients face, but there are also social and community-related downsides to receiving a stipend. Many stipend recipients are the only one in their research group or even in their entire institute, which can feel isolating and mean that they are under supported. Some DRs report feeling excluded from their academic community, as though they are not as qualified or not as valued as their contract-holding peers. Externally-funded DRs may be invited to participate in some aspects of institute life, but then arbitrarily denied access to certain meetings, certain types of funding, use of certain resources, and membership in certain associations. These smaller exclusions serve as regular reminders that stipend holders are not truly equal members of their institutes.

What can be done?

As noted above, the Max Planck Society is not offering these stipends. The problem is diffused and difficult to solve because there are many smaller organizations involved, instead of a single institution with the power to end stipends with the stroke of a pen like the Max Planck Society did. But we as scientists work in a community together, and stipend holders are our colleagues, office mates, and even community leaders. So what can allies within the MPS do to help?

Institute directors and administrators are crucial in the fight to end stipends across German academia. Leadership in our institutes can send a strong message that externally-funded members of our projects and teams are – or are not – members of our academic community. Include these researchers in all of your institute activities. Share your communal resources with them. Allow them to fully participate in institute life and academic exchange by embracing their academic contributions as valuable, regardless of the bureaucratic technicalities about how they are paid.

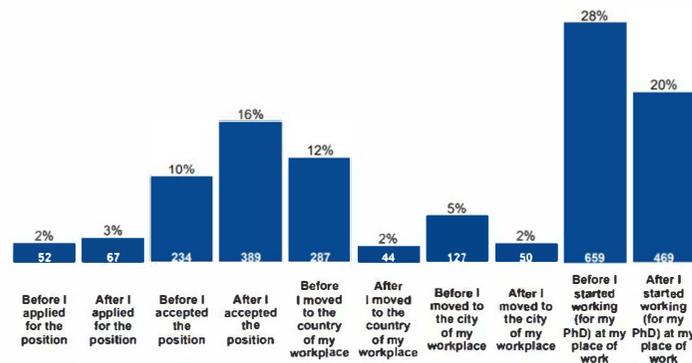


Figure 4.13: "When did you get your contract?" Responses represent the earliest of the chronologically ordered time points at which the contract was received.

Institute leadership also can bring financial support for stipend holders. While directly hiring these DRs with a full employment contract would be the best solution for the DR, this is obviously expensive. A middle-ground option, though, can be to provide top-up contracts to the DRs in exchange for minimal extra responsibilities. By granting DRs a small contract paying around 500 euros per month, the cash compensation is almost equalized, and the employer will cover the cost of health insurance as well, which is equivalent to another 200-300 euros in the DR's pocket. However, it should be noted that this still does not solve immigration issues, and it only partially solves social security. Additionally, if the DR needs to do a significant amount of work to "earn" this top up contract, the inequality in compensation will persist.

Socially and professionally, research group leaders and PIs can help by being well-informed about the disadvantages of stipends, and sharing this information candidly with their supervisees. When a senior academic in a position of power over a DR “encourages” them to apply for a stipend based on the supposed prestige and promises of future networking, the DR may feel forced to apply for that external funding. The DR may also not be aware of the trade offs they are making in terms of security until it is too late.

Good supervisors will not pressure their DRs to apply for external funding. DRs should not have to fear that they cannot finish their PhDs unless they acquire third party funding; this is a problem that more senior academics surely face, but it should not be passed off to the most junior and vulnerable members of their community. Some senior academics may have affiliations with funding institutions or professional connections to their staff. Leveraging these relationships to press other institutes to convert their stipends into contracts is a key act of allyship.

But if you are just a doctoral researcher, how can you support your colleagues who receive stipends?

Be a listening ear. Come with us to the immigration office if you speak German. Treat us like full and equal members of your community. Most importantly, keep this issue on the agenda in your institute, and make sure your directors know that this is important to you. Because so many stipend holders feel like they’re the only one. When just one or two people in an entire institute have this exceptional case, their problems can seem unique. Thanks to the network we have built in PhDnet, we know that unfortunately, their problems are not at all unique, and in fact there are affected doctoral researchers across all the different fields. Know that you are not alone – we here at PhDnet stand in solidarity with you!